

UMass profs pedal apples to fund research

New varieties draw people for tastings

By TRUDY TYNAN

Associated Press

BELCHERTOWN – The late apples, red, yellow and green, hang thick on the trees overlooking New England hills aflame with the colors of autumn.

And business is brisk at the farm stand.

But this is no ordinary orchard.

Since the University of Massachusetts slashed funding for the land-grant school's research orchard a decade ago, professors have had to rely increasingly on selling produce from a roadside stand to maintain the 45-acre orchard that serves as their laboratory.

The stand at the Cold Spring Orchard, a few miles from the Amherst campus, also offers other fruit in season. But apples rule in autumn. There are nearly 200 varieties ranging from Roxbury Russets, developed in Massachusetts in the early 1600s, to varieties so new they have no names.

And with this year's rainy, cool summer, the crop has been unusually heavy and late across Massachusetts – with most varieties ripening nearly two weeks later than normal – said UMass professor Wes Autio.

“Usually, the season is winding down by mid-October, but this years there are still lots of apples on the tress and pick-your-own operations are still going strong.”

“It's just wonderful,” said Peggy Bombardier of Granby, pausing to admire a Winter Banana, a golden dessert apple with a banana-like smell, as she picked out a bag of Baldwins and Roxbury Russets for a pie. “We've been coming for years and have told all our friends about it.”

As part of market research, the university enlists its farm stand customers in taste-testing new varieties, said farm manager Joseph Sincuk.

“When they first come in, people tend to stick with Macs and Red Delicious and other apples that they are familiar with, but pretty soon they are trying out other varieties,” Sincuk said. “Their whole palate changes.”

For an apple connoisseur, it's a cornucopia of delights.

The university's agriculture professors, best known for their work in finding new techniques to reduce the use of chemical pesticides, aren't alone in facing cutbacks.

Their research orchard is the largest remaining in New England because others have fallen victim to budget cuts, and land grant universities from California to Michigan have seen cutbacks.

Still, extensions specialist Jon Clements has rows of dwarf trees no more than two feet across strung on wires, more like grapes, in a test of a high-density growing technique, used in Europe and British Columbia, that squeezes more than 2,000 tress onto an acre.

A key benefit is the trees being bearing in their second season, instead of five to six years, so growers can quickly take advantage of the popularity of new species, he said. But it's expensive to install and he is growing a wide variety of apples to see which do best here.

Just down the hill, researchers looking to boost the apple wine and hard cider market are experimenting with growing some of the oldest strains of apples developed before refrigeration specifically for hard cider.

"It's very important to us to have this research operation here," said Timothy Smith of Shelburne, president of the Massachusetts Fruit Growers Association. He said the growers rely heavily on the university's work in adapting new strains and techniques to small family farms and a regional market that turns on taste and direct sales to consumers.

"You can try out new varieties in Washington state, but you really need to try them out in your growing area to know if they will work out for you," Smith said.

The association bought the 215 acres on which the orchard is located and gave it to the university in the 1960s when the school plowed up the campus orchard to make way for dormitories.

Sales at the farm stand, which is open daily from August through November and on a self-serve basis through January, have grown to about \$80,000 annually, Sincuk said. And the university has added tours for schoolchildren with more than a thousand kindergarten and first graders visiting the orchard this year.

"When they come in, people can't help but asking what we do," Sincuk said. "And then they come back with their kids. We're becoming an outreach operation for agricultural research."